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ABSTRACT

Activities that have helped to make the Watervliet (New York) High School Russian language education program highly successful involve return visits by former students who are using their Russian language skills in various ways after graduation. These graduates include student teachers of Russian, college students taking Russian to satisfy a requirement, and individuals using Russian in some way to support themselves. Graduates are encouraged to send Russian language or related materials, including audiovisdual aids, to the school for classroom use. Current students also participate in festivals and classes at the nearby State University of New York campus and compete in national language competitions. The high school also offers the following services: a free translation service, a consumer guide for Russian-speaking community members, and peer tutoring for its own students. The newest extension of the program is a Russian studies institute to be offered to high school students by a local junior college. (MSE)

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Using University and Community Resources in the Teaching of Russian

Ronald W. Bustin

This morning I will try to give you a feeling for our Russian program at Watervliet High School, with all its idiosyncrasies. I do not claim to have a panacea for increasing foreign language enrollments. What I have to say does work for us and, hopefully, you will benefit from some of our methods. There are other fine high school Russian programs scattered throughout New York State. Among them the program at Shaker High School taught by my good friend Tom Gutch.

This is my twenty-first year teaching Russian and German at Watervliet High School and I have loved every minute of it, despite a rather hectic schedule. In early September I was informed by the administration of our school district that a total of 135 studentse would be enrolled in six section of Russian language. Since I also teach three seminars in German plus my duties as foreign language department chairperson, it was quite obvious that something had to be done. After all, six Russian classes plus three German seminars in a seven period day! Well, after explaining to the administration that even Peter the Great could not work this out, they hired another Russian teacher to relieve me. This is really my easiest year of all, as I said, my twenty-first. Because now I only have four Russian classes, three German sections and my foreign language department duties. I suppose the reason for this increase was having fifty-two students in Russian I, more than one-third of our ninth grade.

Our new Russian teacher, by the way, is a graduate of our high school and a former participant in the prestigious SUNY-Moscow Exchange Program. He also teaches Russian in grades four through eight in the adjoining Maplewood Elementary School where Russian is required. The community is Russian with first, second and third generation speakers who attend their own Russian Orthodox Church. The Maplewood Russian Program was the first F.L.E.S. Program in Russian in the United States, which I introduced in 1964. We in Watervliet are also looking into the possibility of introducing Russian in our own elementary school next year.

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Although Watervliet, New York, is a blue collar community and our high school is a small city high school with all the typical urban problems, we have had a rather large number of our graduates continue in Russian.

The topic of my talk is "Using University and Community Resources in the Teaching of Russian." This very university is certainly a major resource. However, we at Watervliet High School consider the world our community and I will try to explain why.

As I have already stated, it is necessary to give you some background material as to what Watervliet High School's Russian program is like so that you will get the "feeling" for what we are trying to do.

A rather large number of our graduates do go on in Russian. At any given time there are usually between fifteen to twenty of them taking Russian in some college or university. Last year we had two at the United States Military Academy at West Point, several in various branches of the SUNY system, and some at other colleges such as Wells, Marist, the University of Rochester and the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. I am very proud of the fact that in each of our graduating classes since 1971 there have always been students who have majored in Russian in college. This is continuing and I am absolutely elated that in our present Russian IV class we have a number of students who will definitely major or minor in Russian. Just about all will continue in Russian in one way or another. Five of them are also studying German. Two of these German students are triple language students who are also enrolled in either French IV of Spanish IV. In fact, I expect them to do quite well in the next NYSAFLT Student Scholarship competition. Only ten of these scholarships are awarded annually--one for each NYSAFLT Region in the State of New York--and I am proud to say that a Watervliet High School senior has won this prestigious award for the Capital Region in 1980, 1981, 1983 and 1984. Three of the four recipients either majored or minored in Russian in college; all took Russian. We at Watervliet High School were also quite honored to receive The James E. Allen Award from NYSAFLT in 1981. For us, the greatest honor is recognition by one's peers. I sincerely believe that NYSAFLT represents the best hope for effective foreign language teaching in our state.

Now that I have given you a little background on our program, let me give some examples of actual use of university and community resources in the teaching of Russian.

Our students are certainly our greatest resource. At Watervliet High School we make it a policy to keep in touch with literally dozens of graduates who have done something, somewhare, somehow with Russian. We analyze their tests, their texts, their worksheets, everything. We invite them back to talk to us. Last year I had eight graduates return. Students talking to students. These students in grades eight through twelve are influenced greatly by their peers. After all, they hear me every day talk about foreign languages and career education.

I divide this Russian Language Speakers Corps into several groups. First, the Russian Major. We have had quite a few superb student teachers from this very fine institution. Believe me, I really need them. We rely on methods students who, by the way, make great tutors. We also use students from SUNYA's Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures who, although not all in the teacher education program, have tutored, lectured and given foreign language demonstrations. The Russian program at SUNYA is second to none, and, through professor Toby Clyman of that department, we have had many Russian majors over the past decade contribute in a very positive manner to our program. This course, which is for credit, is called Russian 395 and has also been referred to as "Operation Outreach." It is a field experience giving SUNYA Russian majors the opportunity to leave the ivory tower, help others, and gain practical experience. I should add that although the majority of these student interns are from SUNYA, we have had them from other schools such as Wells College and Hartwick College. This semester we have our fifth intern in as many years who is a graduate of our high school. Next semester SUNYA will send us another one of our own alumni to tutor in Russian. And I have them lined up for the next six years. These interns are especially or simply, general language tutoring.

The second group of this Russian Language Speaker Corps consists of non-language majors who are taking a Russian course to satisfy some foreign language requirement for a degree in history, political science, biology, chemistry, etc. We are equal opportunity listeners and accept both undergraduate and graduate students from anywhere on earth.

As foreign language teachers, we must realize that not every student we come into contact with will major in our discipline. I encourage all students to study a foreign language. Business students! Science students! Why not? This, it seems to me, is most conducive to the needs of our constantly changing world. I have had science majors explain their course work in Russian to my classes--classes with students who plan on pursuing careers in science! Without these potential science majors in foreign languages our total program could be hurt due to the lack of enrollment. That's the key word. Enrollment! After all, administrators must justify not only their own existence, but also these courses to taxpayers. What I am trying to say is that every year, based on the clientele I have to work with, I must adapt.

The third group of my Russian Language Speakers Corps consists of the Russian Language USER--either a native speaker of Russian or the person who is able to support himself because of a knowledge of Russian. We have used both, including a large number of our own graduates. Our newest staff member is a product of Russian language training throughout the Maplewood Elementary School, Watervliet High School, SUNYA and the SUNY-Moscow Exchange Program. And one of our graduates is currently a graduate assistant with the Slavic Language Department at SUNYA and another works for the same department under a work-study program.

During the past decade our graduates have been speaking to Russian classes and sending us examples of the kinds of things they have been involved with. So much was coming in last year that I personally Xeroxed about 200 copies a day for one solid week of pertinent material. On several occasions I was almost declared Persona Non Grata by our office staff. These people who have aided our program work for the C.I.A., N.S.A., Department of Agriculture, U.S. Army Military Intelligence, U.S. Air Force Military Intelligence, and independent translating firms. Last year alone, our graduates used their Russian language skills in Japan monitoring Soviet submarines, in Germany listening in on Warsaw Pact maneuvers, and, literally, in the shadow of the Kremlin itself. When that Korean plane was so tragically shot down last year, a graduate of our high school was involved in translating and analyzing those Soviet communications tapes.

Our Russian classes take advantage of everything, everywhere, everyone. Our whole planet, which is but a minute speck in the entire cosmos, is where the action is. That's our community. For instance, we take pride in the fact that this university system established the first on-going undergraduate exchange with a Soviet institution of higher education. Started in 1975, each year under an agreement of reciprosity approximately ten Soviet students and ten American students throughout the SUNY system spend a semester abroad studying each other's language and culture. There is also the opportunity for graduate students to participate in ardemic study in Moscow. Since its inception, five Watervliet High School graduates have taken part on both levels and the students they report back to at our school with slide presentations, lectures and various displays are the ultimate beneficiaries. Since 1971, there have always been students from our school (current and alumni) in Russia in each calendar year.

We have one of the largest slide collections of the Soviet Union in the country. One of our graduates, who continued her Russian studies at Smith College in North Hamoton, Massachusetts, has been teaching at the Anglo-American School in Moscow during the past two years. We have benefitted greatly from the materials she has been sending us--most recently fourteen Soviet filmstrips on Russian fairy tales.

This university is a cultural oasis. Our Russian students have participated in World Week, Community Day Activities--most recently, last weekend when they had the opportunity to sample Russian food provided by the SUNYA Slavic Club. This experience, plus a filmstrip on Russian cooking, provided for excellent conversation practice in class. Our students have also viewed Russian and Soviet films off campus and again, thanks to Professor Clyman, our students have had the opportunity to sit in on her very inspiring lectures on Russian literature.

We at Watervliet High School are service-oriented when it comes to Russian. We are willing to help people in our community with our free translating service. This is especially conducive to the needs of our aging Slavic population. And we recognize these students for service at graduation ceremonies. We have also been working on a consumer guide for Russian speaking citizens through a mini-grant from NYSAFLT. We want to know where

it's happening. We subscribe to Pravda and many journals such as Soviet Life and Sputnik. Some of our students have Soviet pen pals. We have also been corresponding with some very prominent Americans on the subject of Russian language study in American society.

We have actually received personal replies from such people as former President Gerald Ford, Vice-President George Bush, Robert McFarlane, who is President Reagan's National Security Advisor, Senator Alfonse D'Amato, the Secretary of Defense and Congressman Sam Stratton. Mr. Stratton, by the way, visited the Soviet Union as a member of the House Armed Services Sub-Committee and was kind enough to give a slide presentation to all our Russian classes a few years ago. We also correspond with the Soviet Consulate to the United Nations and have visited them a few times. After all, the Soviets, with all their propaganda, are members of the community too. And local military recruiters (our Army) have provided us with Russian experts on more than one occasion. This is a free service.

Last week an FBI agent came to our school to investigate one of my students who is being considered for employment with the federal government--using Russian. When I got through to him about how nice it would be ito speak to my Russian students about career opportunities in languages, he agreed.

My students are willing to serve the community. They helped translate Russian for the Census Bureau and Amnesty International. They have assisted me in translating for the sister city pairing project involving Albany and the city of Pskov. They get involved. And at least once a month our local newspapers print something about accomplishments or projects of Russian language students. We value the press and use it.

We have a Career Internship Tutoring Program in Russian where students help students. Members of our Russian Tutor Squad have participated in many competitions sponsored by the American Council of Teachers of Russian. They have won medals on both the national and international levels. We use these outside activities to insure continued efforts.

I really look forward to a great year with my Russian students and sincerely wish all of you the same. This year we will be participating in more competitions and developing our own foreign language newsletters. Our

Russian IV seniors are now being exposed to a second Slavic language--Serbo-Croatian--from our new foreign exchange student from Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

I am especially pleased to announce the establishment of a first of its kind Russian Studies Institute at the Junior College of Albany next summer for high school students, under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Needless to say, we at Watervliet High School will try to get involved. Our community is constantly changing and what I have attempted to do is to simply tell you about our program, give you some ideas and I hope that I have made some positive contributions to foreign language instruction.